Blood Of My Blood

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Blood Of My Blood

by angelshotgun

Summary

Dean is de-aged by a witch. Every night for six nights, he'll gain another five years until he's back to his original age and the curse has run its course.
This means that Sam has six days to discover things he never before knew about his brother and try to mitigate some of the damage, hoping that his steady love and support will still help Dean once the curse is over.

Notes

i have been listening to Brother Let Me Be Your Shelter on repeat for almost two hours now and that is where the title came from

please heed the tags! this will have a happy/resolved ending but i do torture the boys for a bit before that

Chapter 1: Five Years Old (face of innocence)

Dean's clothes were in a messy pile in the middle of the destroyed living room, and Sam's heart stopped in his chest.

He'd known the witch had blasted Dean with something before taking off out the door, but Dean had been okay enough to yell at Sam to go after her, and he'd sprinted off into the humid night convinced that at least Dean wasn't hurt. He'd hurried back after killing her, her body dissolving into a malevolent cloud of smog before dissipating, which saved him the cleanup and made sure he could get back to Dean quicker.

He nudged the screen door with his shoulder, and it creaked. The top hinge was hanging precariously. He brought his Taurus up, checking every corner of the room before he stepped inside. "Dean?"

No answer. Fear jumped into his throat, threatening to choke him. He tried again, louder. "Dean!" He moved further into the room, looking around for any sign of Dean.

The bundle of clothes on the floor jumped a little just as another woman stepped through the kitchen doorway, and Sam threw himself between them, pointing the gun at her. "He's okay," the woman said.

"You a witch?" Sam gritted out, still shielding the clothing bundle, which he could see in his peripheral vision. It was still moving.

She hesitated. "Put the gun down." He didn't, and she relented. "Okay, yes, yes I am. But I'm the good kind, I promise."

"There's no such thing as a good witch." His finger tightened on the trigger and she held her hands up, taking a step back.

"Good witch! Healing magic," she insisted quickly, and he took in her attire. Scrubs. "Just healing. Nothing evil."

Sam lowered the gun slightly. He was always more sympathetic to the plights of the things they hunted than Dean. Speaking of, "Where's Dean?"

"He's right behind you. He'll be back to normal in six days, from what I can sense. He'll age five years per night."

Sam tucked the gun back into his waistband completely, turning

around and nearly dropping to his knees in shock. The small boy standing draped to the knees in Dean's t-shirt looked at him with wide green eyes. He glanced back at the witch, but she'd disappeared. That was okay. He had bigger things to deal with. "Dean?" he murmured, sitting on the floor. "Is that you?"

The boy eyed him carefully. "Who're you? Where's Dad?" To Sam's horror, tears started to well up in the boy's eyes. "Where's Sammy? I'm s'posed to take care of Sammy."

Okay, it was definitely Dean in there. Sam's panicked brain scrambled for an explanation to offer him. Dean burst into a panicked wail, and any lie Sam might have thought of fled his mind. The truth, then. "Whoa, hey, Dean," he soothed, trying to make his voice soft and calming like Dean had done for him so often. "Hey, it's okay. I'll explain everything, okay?"

The wails subsided to hiccups, and Dean crossed matchstick arms in front of him, glaring as if to tell Sam to get on with it.

Sam took a deep breath. "This is going to sound crazy," he warned, "but I'm Sam, and you're here like this because of a witch."

Dean eyed him skeptically. "You're Sam."

"Yeah. Look, it's the year 2014." Sam pulled out his phone, showing the date to Dean. Dean was more fascinated by the phone itself, and Sam thought that it may have been the futuristic appearance of the device itself that convinced Dean he was telling the truth.

Dean's spine straightened. "What, so I'm usually grown up like you but a witch zapped me?"

Sam nodded, trying to remember. When had Dean found out about the supernatural? Was he going to have to try to convince Dean that witches were real?

"Didja kill her?" Dean asked instead, and Sam's eyebrows ascended. The words sounded funny in Dean's young voice, and Sam fought back a laugh at the absurdity of the situation. In what world would a five year old be asking a question like that?

"Yeah," Sam told him instead, because obviously Dean at five still understood too much. "Come on, let's get you somewhere safe."

Dean scrubbed the back of one hand across the drying tear tracks on

his face. God, he was so small. His arms were thin, his shoulders hunching in again. He looked more vulnerable than Sam had ever seen Dean. “Mkay,” he said after a moment.

Sam stood up again, his knees creaking, and offered his hand to Dean. After a moment, Dean took it. “You’re really Sammy?” he asked and, when Sam nodded, Dean squeezed his hand a little tighter and followed Sam out to the car, sitting in the backseat without protest.

Sam drove them back to the motel in silence. It was a long drive, they hadn’t wanted to stay in the same town they were killing someone in, and so for a little over half an hour, he watched the light of streetlights they passed play over Dean’s solemn face as he stared out the car window, and he wondered how on earth he was going to handle the next six days.

When he pulled into the gravel lot, Dean was slumped over in the backseat, one tiny fist curled near his mouth. His soft breaths hitched when the car came to a stop, but he didn’t wake up. Sam opened the back door and unbuckled Dean, catching him gently as he slumped forward. He pulled Dean into his arms, settling him so he was resting comfortably against Sam’s shoulder, and walked up to their room, fumbling for his keys.

He made it in and sat down on the bed, still holding Dean. When he moved to put Dean down, though, the boy squirmed, gripping two fistfuls of Sam’s shirt. “No,” he said stubbornly.

“You don’t want to get in bed and get some sleep?” Sam asked, covering one of Dean’s small hands with his own, larger one. “You gonna let go of my shirt?”

“No,” Dean repeated. “You.”

“You don’t want to be put down?” At that Dean nodded, nuzzling his face back into Sam’s shoulder, and Sam made a thoughtful noise. Okay. At least he knew what Dean wanted.

He was pretty sure that when Dean was artificially deaged, he essentially *was* exactly the Dean he’d been at that age, which was going to be interesting when he started getting older. For now, though, Sam had Dean as he had been at five snuggling up to him.

Sam, of course, had no memories of Dean at five, but this had been barely a year after the house had burned. This Dean, small enough to support with one arm, had already carried Sam out of a fire. And if

this Dean was coming from a year after the house burned, then…

Sam's arms tightened around Dean, and he let out a sleepy grumble. That meant that John was half-mad with grief still, and the other half-mad with the drive for revenge, which meant that he probably wasn't spending too much time hugging his kids. Not that he'd ever really spent much time hugging his kids. Sam didn't know much about children, but he was pretty sure he'd read somewhere once that they needed hugs and affection to thrive.

This Dean had lost that just a year ago, and he was bound to be feeling that loss keenly.

Sam adjusted the sleeping Dean in his arms, then kicked off his shoes and swung his feet up onto the bed, leaning against the headboard. Against his chest, Dean slumbered on.

Sam pressed a kiss to his sandy blond hair. He couldn't go back in time and fix anything, but he could hug this Dean who needed it so badly. "It's okay," he murmured, even though Dean couldn't hear him. "I've got you now. I'll take care of you, I promise."

Dean made a small snuffling noise in his sleep, and Sam's heart melted. He reached down for the blanket folded at the end of the bed, pulling it over both of them, before his eyes slipped closed and he fell asleep, exhausted, sitting up at the head of the bed.

At midnight, he woke up as a soft glow suffused the room. Dean, still sleeping on him, was emitting the light and as Sam watched, his features morphed and changed, depositing a ten year old on the bed next to Sam.

Sam, exhausted from the hunt, parsed through that information at about quarter speed, deciding that if this Dean didn't remember the hunt or being five again or Sam when he woke up, he probably wouldn't appreciate waking up in bed with a man he didn't know.

Stroking a hand through Dean's hair, Sam slipped out from under the blanket and collapsed face down across the other bed in the room, falling asleep again immediately.

Chapter 2: 10 Years Old (skittish and bruised)

Chapter Notes

> i am craving ihop (although i cannot afford it) and that did influence this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He woke up to a muffled noise of alarm, and pried his eyes open instead of rolling back over and snoozing some more, because he remembers last night and- oh, fuck, Dean.

Dean, who should be ten now, and will be ten until midnight again, when he'll do the weird glowy thing, and wow, Sam really hates witches.

Dean was sitting stiffly on the side of the bed, head bowed, and Sam can't remember how much he knows. "Dean?" he asked, cautiously.

"Why'd you kidnap me?" Dean snapped, and Sam's heart sank.

He moved away, trying to look as non threatening as possible. With pillow lines across his face and his hair in a bird's nest, he was pretty sure he was managing quite well. Dean didn't relax. "I didn't," Sam told him. "You're usually thirty-five, but you got cursed by a witch. I'm Sam. Your brother."

"Prove it."

Sam pulled out the phone, more advanced than anything Dean had ever seen before, and it did the trick again. The suspicion in Dean's eyes lessened somewhat. Dean's face was rougher than a ten year old's should be, Sam noticed. There was something already hardened about his big brother. "You want breakfast?" he asked, and Dean nodded, standing up gingerly.

Sam turned on the bedside lamp, and held in a gasp as the light washed over Dean. There was a stark bruise, purple against Dean's soft skin, smudged above his collar on the back of his neck. "What happened to you?"

Surely Dad hadn't let Dean hunt, not at ten. Sam would have remembered that. Sam would have held that against Dad to the day he'd died, if that had happened. So Dean couldn't have gotten it on a

hunt, not at ten years old.

The possibilities that realization left, though, weren't reassuring. Dean had whipped around to stare at Sam when he'd asked the question, and he blew out a breath of air. Dean always did that when he didn't want to have to talk. "Dean," Sam prodded. "What happened to your neck?"

"S'nothing," Dean muttered roughly, turning away. "Got any clothes that'll fit me?"

Sam resolved to keep poking more later. Dean shouldn't have been hurt, not like that, not at that age, and something was off. "I don't think so. I'll run out and get us breakfast and bring it back, sound good?"

Dean nodded jerkily. "Yeah." he sat back down, stretching his back and wincing again. "Pancakes?" He sounded so hopeful, and really, pancakes were an easy request.

"Yeah, sure." Sam tugged his shoes on. "You still like the blueberry ones from IHOP?"

Dean smiled, the sun breaking through that strange oldness on his face. "You remember that, huh?"
"Dude, IHOP pancakes and pie are the only way I can get you to eat fruit." Sam chuckled, grabbing his wallet. There was an IHOP just down the street a few blocks, he could walk. It would wake him up a little bit. "I'll be back in a bit. Try not to get seen, kidnapped, or killed."

"Yessir," Dean answered, in a vaguely mocking tone.

Sam's walk to IHOP was filled with thinking about things too complicated to deal with before coffee and food. Dean was strange.

Well, Dean was always strange, but he was more strange now. He moved and talked like he was grown, and there was a cynical twist to his voice that made him sound much too jaded for his age.

Sam had obviously missed a lot while he was growing up, because he could never remember Dean acting or looking like this. He headed back with the pancakes.

Dean was obviously already fucked up from the life, he decided, even at this age, and Sam couldn't help but wonder, if he could help Dean

at all while he was like this, would it still affect Dean when he was back to normal? Could Sam do anything now to help his brother in the long term?

He didn't know but he could try, and he could start with giving Dean pancakes.

They were still warm in the styrofoam containers, and Dean shot Sam a grin as he dug in, wolfing down his food rapidly. Sam, with his own stack of pancakes across the table, chuckled. "You really have always eaten that fast."

Dean eyed him. "Well, yeah. S'what you do when you get food."

The way he said it made something in Sam's stomach twist unpleasantly, and he stabbed his fork through his two breakfast sausages in his own container, depositing them in Dean's. "You need more protein," he said gruffly, and then pulled out his phone.

He looked up 'signs of food insecurity' while Dean finished his pancakes and started in on his sausages. "Take it slow," Sam told him. "You'll give yourself indigestion." Dean at thirty five did that a good bit. The screen of search results loaded, and the unpleasant twist in Sam's stomach turned into a full blown lurch. He pushed his pancakes over to Dean, only a few bites taken out of them, and Dean dug in.

He'd thought Dean had been well into his teenage years before Dad had really stopped caring, had stopped caring enough to leave them money when he was gone or to make sure he didn't drink away all their money, but this Dean was proof that that wasn't true.

Was proof that Dean had been good, so good at shielding so much from Sam that there were things about his own childhood he'd never known.

Sam was going to take care of Dean, now, the way Dean had taken care of him. "We gotta head out soon," Sam said, pulling up a new search window and handing the phone to Dean. "We're headed to Kansas soon, but we're in Louisiana now and it'll be about an eleven hour drive. You want to look up someplace in mid Oklahoma to grab lunch?"

After a few seconds of careful poking at the screen, Dean seemed to have the machinations of the phone pretty well worked out, and he was scrolling through a list of restaurants while Sam packed up their duffel bags.

“How about this, the Dairy Lou?” Dean asked. “We’ve eaten there before, it’s in Ada, Oklahoma. They had awesome milkshakes.”

Sam vaguely remembered that. A fleeting memory, because he’d only been six, but there was the impression of a small white building and the sweet taste of cherry milkshake on his tongue. “That sounds great, Dean. You ready to leave?”

And so he talked to Dean about trivial things, Dean’s interests, because there was too much on Dean’s shoulders for Sam to be adding more burdens, and he fed Dean, stopping at gas stations for snacks and drinks and then at the Dairy Lou for a truly massive bacon cheeseburger that Dean devoured, and the whole time, his thoughts were drawn back to that bruise smudged across Dean’s neck.

Dean was a good passenger, between bouts of conversation he stared out the window. He grinned when Sam let him pick the music, shoving a ZZ Top tape in and turning the volume louder.

Sam was tired and his back ached when they made it to the bunker, though, so he slumped into the kitchen, pulling open the cupboard. Dean followed him, looking around in awe. “It’s an old bunker made by a secret society of monster hunters,” Sam explained, pulling a bottle of whiskey out of the cabinet. “And I need a fucking drink.”

Dean’s head turned to look into the other room, through the doorway, and Sam saw the bruise on Dean’s neck again. He mentally upped his drink estimate to two or perhaps three.

Dinner. It was time for dinner. He swallowed down his shot and moved to the fridge. They’d only been gone three days, chances were stuff was still good. There were takeout boxes stacked in the fridge, and Sam pulled them out, motioning to Dean to start opening them. They opened them together, tossing out the spring rolls that had gone unbearably soggy and deeming everything else perfectly edible.

For a ten year old, Dean sure could put away a lot of food. Even though Sam had fed him, had made sure he always had food, he still ate like he was afraid Sam was going to snatch it away.

Sam drank some more whiskey.

He wasn’t drunk, just buzzed pleasantly when Dean stood up to carry his empty takeout box to the trash, and winced as he moved, just like he’d been doing all day. He was buzzed enough that it loosened his tongue, made him voice his worries. “You’re hurt,” he said. “You’re-

Dean, you're hurting. What happened?"

Dean shook his head.

Sam stood up, walking closer to where Dean was, statue-still by the stove. "Dean, what happened? How did you get hurt?"

Dean ducked his head, not meeting Sam's eyes, and Sam grabbed Dean's hand gently, squeezing it in a show of support. "It's okay," he said. "You can tell me, and I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

Dean shook his head wordlessly, and Sam made a frustrated noise behind his teeth.

And Dean flinched. Flinched away from him, violently, hard enough to send himself stumbling into the stove, and everything around Sam just stopped.

Dean let out a stifled noise that might have been a sob or might have just been fear.

"Dean."

Dean didn't move.

"Dean. I'm not going to hurt you." But Dean was nodding slowly, and turning around, and yanking his shirt over his head, and whatever Sam was going to say next flew out of his mind, because Dean's back was patterned over in bruises, the one on his neck just barely a hint of what he was carrying. "Dean, how-? Who?" But he already knew. There was only one person it could have been. Dad.

"Let me get you an ice pack," Sam said numbly, stepping around Dean and pulling open the freezer. They had quite a few. Covering Dean's back would take quite a few. "Do you want to go lie down so we can put them on?"

Dean was still quiet, silent tears dripping down his face, and Sam, with nauseating certainty, put two and two together. There were the imprints of a belt across Dean's back, and Sam, with whiskey on his breath, had just acted aggressively toward his brother. He moved away slowly. "Or you can get your own ice packs. I don't have to help."

Dean crept up to the freezer, pulling out three. They were the big ones, they would cover his back. Sam stood at the edge of the kitchen

and tried not to hyperventilate. Dean had thought- he'd really thought- and Sam hadn't been acting in the nicest way, either. Dean must be terrified still.

"Dean," Sam said when Dean moved to leave the room. "I- I need you to know you're safe now, okay? I would never." He tried to put as much conviction into the words as he could. "You're my brother, and I love you, and I would never, *ever* hurt you like that, okay?"

Dean swallowed hard, looking up at him. "S'good to know you didn't turn out like Dad." He shrugged wryly. "I believe you," he said after a minute. "You've been real good. Guess it was just the whiskey smell." And he turned to leave.

"Good night, Dean," Sam said. And then, "I love you."

And then he put the whiskey back in the cabinet, and he sat down at the kitchen table, and he cried.

Chapter End Notes

> i only just switched to she/they pronouns instead of she/her and everybody in real life pretty much just uses she/her for me still but someone online has used they MULTIPLE times and i am very happy! anyway just wanted to share because happiness :)

Chapter 3: Fifteen Years Old (bleeding quiet)

Chapter Notes

here lies underage prostitution, ye be warned

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sam woke up, Dean was crying softly down the hall, soft, dry sobs that told Sam that Dean had been crying for a long time.

Dean was fifteen today, and he was already crying.

Sam remembered Dean at fifteen. He'd been cocky, swaggering, he'd already learned how far a good set of dimples could get him in life. To Sam, he'd been invincible.

To Sam now, he was small and vulnerable, hunched in the hallway crying. Sam briefly wondered how tall Dean would have been, how well he would have filled out, if he'd had a steady supply of good food throughout his formative years. "Dean?" he said cautiously.

Dean was slumped against the wall with his knees pulled up to his chin. Sam noticed that he'd raided older-him's dresser, wearing a tattered old Led Zep shirt and old, ratty sweatpants. At Sam's voice he sprung to his feet, a flash of pain crossing his face. One arm curled protectively around his midsection as he faced off with Sam.

Sam begun the now-familiar spiel. "It's okay, Dean. I'm Sam, and you're you, but you're this age because of a curse. You're usually thirty-five." He paused. "And I mean you no harm," he added hastily when Dean's suspicious glare didn't ease. Teenager Dean was smart and scrappy, not as easily convinced as younger Dean had been.

"Tell me something only Sam would know."

Sam racked his brain. "Okay, uh. Rhonda Hurley once- wait, shit, that hasn't happened for you yet. Uh. Remember that one summer when Dad dumped us in that godawful cabin with the family of raccoons in the attic and one day they fell through the ceiling onto the couch?"

Some of the tension sapped from Dean's shoulders. "Yeah, okay. So I'm cursed, what are we doing to fix me?"

"It'll run its course in a few more days," Sam answered. "And there

shouldn't be any lasting effects, so mostly we're waiting. Would you like breakfast?"

Dean clutched his stomach tighter, looking a bit green at the prospect, and alarm bells started ringing in Sam's ears. Something was wrong with Dean. "Hey," he said softly. "Dean, are you all right?"

Dean spun to the side, bracing himself on the wall as he threw up. There was no food in his stomach, evidently, because all that came up was stomach bile. Dean retched again and again, shuddering against the wall, and Sam rushed over to him. Dean flinching from him be damned, that was his brother and he was suffering and Sam was going to help.

He rubbed Dean's back gently, murmuring soothing words, until Dean stopped heaving and sagged, head still bowed, against the wall. Maybe he was sick. "Dean, can you look at me?" Sam moderated his voice, trying to sound how Dean had always done when Sam was sick. It worked, and Dean straightened, meeting Sam's eyes.

"I'm going to feel your forehead to check if you have a fever," Sam said before doing so. Dean felt a little warm, but not too bad. "Let's get you some water to wash out your mouth, okay? Bathroom is this way." He guided Dean down the hall, leading him to the bathroom and filling a cup with water.

Dean rinsed his mouth and spat, then sipped at the cup.

"If you're not sick," Sam said, "You're injured. What's going on? I've got medical supplies, I can help."

Dean looked at him over the rim of the glass and said nothing.

"Is there anything you need?" Sam tried. He felt helpless. Whatever had happened to Dean had already happened, even doing triage for this shadow of his Dean couldn't repair it.

"Can I have a shower?" Dean asked, looking at the shower.

Sam nodded. "Sure, man. I'll be just down the hall in the kitchen, okay?"

Dean cried in the shower. Sam didn't mean to hear, but coming from the kitchen and heading back to his room to get his slippers he could hear Dean through the bathroom door, hitched breaths and tiny whimpers

Sam got a damp cloth and cleaned the vomit off the floor in the hallway. He went into the kitchen and washed his hands, then set about mechanically making breakfast. Down the hall, the shower pounded on. Dean was probably still crying.

Something tickled in the back of Sam's mind. A memory. He'd been in sixth grade, so this Dean was about the right age for it. He'd been doing his math homework when Dean had gotten back to the hotel room and taken a long shower, just like this, and cried, just like this. It had happened multiple times. Sam had only brought it up once, and Dean had told him not to ask about it, and so he hadn't. He wondered now if maybe he should have pushed.

Dean appeared in the doorway, cheeks flushed with the warmth from the shower but back in the same clothes. Sam turned the heat off and removed a skillet full of scrambled eggs from the stove. "Do you think you can eat a little bit?" he asked.

Dean picked at his eggs, pushing them around on the plate. "You're older than my Sam," he said suddenly, and Sam looked up from where he was studying the pepper shaker.

"Yes." Where was Dean going with this?

Dean licked his lips anxiously. "And you know me when I'm older."

"Yes."

"Do I ever-" Dean hesitated. "Do I ever stop doing it?"

Sam set down his fork and folded his hands on the table. This was shaping up to be a Conversation. "Do you ever stop doing what?"

Dean stabbed at his eggs. "The- I just did it for the first time, and I hated it but I know I'm going to have to do it again and I want to know if we're ever secure enough that I don't have to ever again someday." He looked up at Sam, something in his eyes pleading, something in his eyes broken, and Sam caught sight of faint bruising around Dean's throat.

"Dean," he said. "Why is there a handprint on your neck?"

And Dean must be closer to an emotional breakdown than Sam thought, because that question breaks his walls and he's blurting it all out, everything to Sam, and it's the first time Sam has heard any of it, and all he can think is *I should have known* .

“You’re fifteen,” he said when Dean finished talking and was just staring him down, eggs ignored and cold by now. His voice broke on the fifteen. “You were fifteen when you started.”

“Dad left two weeks ago,” Dean whispered. “And he only left thirty bucks, and you can’t pay off a motel room with thirty bucks.”

And then he slipped off the chair and left, because that was what Dean did when faced with confrontation, he ran and he ran and he ran away, and Sam was left staring at Dean’s retreating back.

“You were fifteen,” he whispered again to himself. He doesn’t want to believe it, but the evidence is right there. The words left a sour taste in his mouth.

Dean stayed in his room for the rest of the day. Sam took him food, and Dean ate it, but he didn’t talk and he didn’t come out of the room. Sam ached to help him, but he didn’t know how. Selfishly, he was almost glad Dean had left. He needed time to figure out how to bring all of this up to his Dean, when he got his Dean back.

Chapter End Notes

> i am legit thiiiiiiis close to abandoning even trying to study and getting ihop instead

Chapter 4: Twenty Years Old (young and old and brave)

Chapter Summary

Dean is twenty, and he's coming to Sam fresh off a weekend in a loft with a certain very bendy yoga instructor.

Chapter Notes

abandonment issues with a side of guilt, coming right up

The next day was easier. Sort of.

When Sam woke up, Dean was already poking around in the bunker's industrial kitchen, a waffle maker Sam hadn't known they owned steaming merrily away on the counter.

So Dean probably didn't think he'd been kidnapped.

"Hi," Sam risked saying from the doorway, and Dean spun around, his eyebrows arching.

"Wow," he said after a minute. "You really did keep the stupid hair."

"Hey," Sam snapped, nettled. "It's not stupid, and- you know what's going on?"

Dean shrugged, stirring a bowl of waffle batter. "Woke up in a strange bed, saw a wallet on the bedside table, it's got a picture of me and a date from the future. Not hard to guess there's some kind of time travel fuckery happening."

Sam edged further into the kitchen, sitting down at the table. "Okay. Yeah, sort of. You got deaged by a witch. And you're handling this surprisingly well."

Dean made a face. "Yesterday I was in a very nice loft with a very bendy yoga instructor, and now I'm in a Cold War concrete bunker. I wouldn't say I'm handling it well."

"Oh. You're making waffles though, and not leaving or attacking or anything."

Dean shook his waffle batter covered spoon at Sam. "And where

would leaving or attacking get me? I don't even know where I am."

He looked scared, Sam realized. He was putting on one hell of a front, but the defensive bow to his shoulders and the shadows behind his eyes were all screaming fear. "You're in an old Men of Letters bunker in Kansas."

Dean relaxed a little bit.

"The exit is through those doors and up the stairs," Sam continued, indicating. "Although I'd really rather you didn't leave, because tonight you're going to age another five years and I don't want to have to track confused, twenty five year old Dean down out in the greater Kansas area."

Dean spooned the batter onto the waffle maker. "Where's Dad?" He asked, and that was a tough one.

On the one hand, this Dean was twenty. He was old enough to know and understand what was happening, he knew Dad was a hunter. He knew the average lifespan of a hunter.

On the other hand, though, this Dean had delicate skin stretched just a little too tight over his cheekbones and it made him like young and fragile and in need of protecting. And this Dean was still fiercely, unquestionably loyal to Dad. Hearing that Dad was dead might lead to the breakdown Sam was fearing.

He must have hesitated too long, though, because Dean's face shuttered as he peeled the cooked waffle off of the waffle maker and set it on a plate. "He's dead, isn't he."

Shit. Fuck. Damage control time. "He, uh. Yeah. Went out like a hero though."

Dean nodded, making another waffle. His lips pressed together, like he was trying to contain a sad wobble.

Sam ached to reach out and hug him, but this Dean was all sharp edges and walls and Sam thought that if he tried, he may end up sliced to ribbons.

Dean slid the waffle plate in front of him. "Eat up," he said, with a smile that was too brittle.

Sam obeyed.

Later that day, though, he tracked Dean down to the shooting range and hung around pointedly until Dean yanked the earplugs out and turned on him. “What do you want?” Dean snapped.

“To talk,” Sam said evenly. “You’re twenty. And you said something about a loft, so that means… Lisa. You just met Lisa.”

“I told you about Lisa?” Dean shook his head slightly. “Wait, why do you *remember* Lisa?”

Sam hesitated, but this wasn’t a time travel thing. Telling Dean wouldn’t hurt anything. “You actually, uh. You got out of the life and lived with Lisa for a while, in what’s later on for you.”

Dean sat down, suddenly, on the poured concrete floor of the bunker. The gun in his hands clattered to the ground. “I left hunting.”

Sam sat down next to him. He hadn’t anticipated Dean reacting like this. “For a while, yeah. You went all domestic with Lisa and Ben. I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

Dean went still beside him. “B-Ben?”

Sam cursed internally. “Ben was, uh, Lisa’s kid.”

Dean turned to him, some sort of desperate wonder in his face. “Was he mine? Sam, was he mine?”

Sam thought. Lisa had said he wasn’t, that she’d just had a type, but… “I don’t know for sure. I do know that the kid walked like you, talked like you, and looked up to you.”

“I had a kid,” Dean said, amazement in his voice. “I had a kid and a family.”

Sam, following some long-buried instinct, raised his arm and Dean immediately burrowed into his side, tucking himself under Sam’s arm. Seeking out comfort, something Dean had had far too little of. “Yeah,” he said, his voice rough. “Yeah, you did.”

How had he never known that that was something Dean had wanted? Sure, Dean had never been fully happy or settled with Lisa, and Sam knew there were a variety of reasons for that, but maybe, if their lives had been a little bit different, just a little less dangerous, Dean would have pulled out of the life for good.

Suburbia would have suited Dean, Sam mused. All the things Dean wanted - stability, security, a home and a family - would have been there. Sam found himself thinking, once again, at just how much his brother had given up and how strong Dean was.

“I never thought I deserved a family, not a real one,” Dean confessed, his face still buried somewhere in the region of Sam’s ribcage. “I mean, I have you but I always thought you’d leave eventually. Guess since you’re here and older now it means you didn’t, but I still always thought. And I’m not stupid, I know Dad needed me to be a soldier, not a son.”

Sam didn’t know what to say, so he hugged Dean closer, one broad palm pressed between the wings of Dean’s shoulder blades. Dean was lean. Too lean. Still not eating as well as he should. Dean had always thought Sam would leave him behind without a second thought. Sam felt a stab of guilt.

“But even for a little bit and I’m guessing it didn’t last forever since older me is here in an underground bunker instead of with her, but for a little bit I had the dream of a picture-perfect family.”

“Yeah, Dean,” Sam said around the lump in his throat. “Yeah, you did.”

Chapter 5: Twenty-Five Years Old (abandoned and desperate)

Chapter Summary

> Dean is twenty five. His Sam has been gone to Stanford for almost three years and Dean, Dean isn't handling it well at all.

Chapter Notes

> I typed this entire chapter while waiting for my plane to finish boarding and I'm hoping to finish the story in flight so I can post after

Sam stumbled out of his room just after midnight had hit, following the faint sound of cursing from down the hall.

He saw why as soon as he entered Dean's room. Dean had located alcohol and was thoroughly on his way to consuming all of it. Dean, who was twenty-five.

Sam had never seen Dean at twenty-five, he realized. He'd been away at Stanford. He'd missed that entire year of Dean. He had no idea what he was about to walk into. "Dean?" he said cautiously. Dean was drunk, in a strange situation, and most probably armed.

Dean whirled around to look at him, almost overbalancing. Sure enough, his Colt was held in between them, pointing unsteadily at Sam's heart. Okay, if Dean's aim was suffering he'd probably had enough to drink. "Whoa there, Dean," Sam cautioned. "Let's put the gun away, okay?"

Dean squinted at him in the dim light from the hallway and waved the gun again. "Who're you? Where am I?"

Sam moved slowly into the room, telegraphing his movements. He picked up the wallet that had worked on twenty year old Dean and tossed it to this Dean. "I know it may seem hard to believe, but this is a secure bunker that we live in. You've been temporarily deaged by a witch. I'm Sam, but older."

Dean's finger twitched on the trigger, his lips pulling back into a snarl. "Yeah, nice lie. I almost believed you until you said you were Sam."

Sam backpedaled, really hoping Dean didn't shoot him. Dean's aim was shit, so he'd probably hit an extremity or just graze Sam, but Sam didn't really want to deal with a bullet wound before it even hit one in the morning. "Whoa, okay. Hey. I can prove it to you. Ask me something only Sam would know."

"You're not Sam," Dean insisted, face twisting in what looked like anguish. "Sam's gone. He left me and he'd never coming back. He got out of the life. He left me with Dad."

Sam pulled his own wallet out of his pocket, fishing out a creased old picture. Him and Dean, leaning against the Impala, Dean caught in a laugh, Sam grinning up at his brother. "If I wasn't Sam would I have this?" he asked, showing Dean the photo.

Dean moved closer, examining it. It had been taken the summer before Sam left for Stanford, so - he did some mental math - it had been nearly three years since this Dean had seen his Sam. Dean eventually nodded, looking at the photo, and tucked the gun into his waistband. The glint of a knife disappeared from his other hand, and Sam berated himself for not even noticing the other weapon.

In his defense, he'd been busy trying to keep his blood back in his body.

"You sure grew up a lot," Dean murmured, swaying on his feet, and Sam realized he was so drunk he'd probably blipped right over the whole de-aging thing and thought Sam was his Sam.

Sam could straighten that out later. Right now, Dean needed to sober up, so Sam grabbed his arm gently and started leading him toward the bathroom. A tepid shower and some water would go a long way.

Dean went placidly, if a little bit unsteadily. He wasn't physically lashing out at Sam anymore, but the words were hurting just as much if not more. "Why'd you leave me, Sammy?" he asked as Sam guided him. "You know how Dad gets."

Sam had a horrible thought that he knew with awful certainty was true, even before he asked. "Dean, did he beat you because I left?" He stopped in the hallway, spinning Dean to face him. Haunted green eyes stared up at him. Dean looked terrible, Sam noticed in the light. Like he'd been on a three-year bender, been used as a punching bag, and had lost all hope.

All of which, he reflected unhappily, were probably true.

Dean gave a tiny, jerky nod and offered him a brave smile. Hiding behind false bravado. “Yeah, well. You know how Dad gets.”

Suddenly, Sam needed to know. Needed to know what his actions had wrought that he’d never known about. “He use the belt?” He kept walking toward the bathroom.

“Buckle end, right after you walked out,” Dean told him. “And I just took it like the trained little bitch I am.” The words were spat out, Dean’s hatred for himself palpable.

“No,” Sam said firmly, spinning his brother around and holding him firmly by both shoulders, forcing Dean to look into his eyes. “No, you’re not. Don’t you talk about yourself like that.”

Dean’s eyes shifted to some point on the wall behind Sam, and he sighed. Dean wasn’t going to listen, not while he was like this. Sam tugged him into the bathroom and set about removing Dean’s clothes. Dean stood like a rag doll, letting Sam raise his arms and lower them, then, once he was down to his boxers, Sam shoved him under the steady stream of the shower.

After a few minutes, Dean shook his wet hair out of his face. “Sammy?” he asked.

“Yeah?” Sam was watching carefully to make sure Dean didn’t slip, and cataloging all the visible injuries Dean had. There was a slash across the back of his shoulder that looked fresh, that Sam had only ever seen as a scar. Bruises mottled Dean’s skin, but that was nothing new. Sam wondered if he’d gotten them from Dad, a bar fight, or a hunt. He didn’t ask.

Dean stepped out from under the water. “Got an Advil? Gonna dry off and then crash.”

Sam handed him the pill and a glass of water, then waved his hand at the stack of towels. When Dean was done, Sam led him, still wobbly on his feet, back to his room and deposited him in bed. “Get up at a reasonable hour next time,” he suggested, a hint of teasing in his voice.

“Bitch,” Dean grunted before rolling over and beginning to snore.

It was a more reasonable hour the next time Sam woke up, and he found Dean sitting in his Dean Cave, idly tossing his knife up in the air and catching it again. “Hey,” he said from the doorway. “You gonna

pull a gun on me again?"

Dean turned to look at him, missing the knife on the way down. It embedded itself in the arm of the recliner, and Sam experienced a minor cardiac event at how close to injury Dean had come. "Nah," Dean said roughly. "So. Deaged, huh?"

Sam sat down in the chair next to Dean. "Yeah. Witch got you."

Dean hummed in acknowledgement.

"So," Sam started, not sure what he was going to say. "You feel like I abandoned you to Dad's temper."

"You *did* abandon me to Dad's temper," Dean told him flatly.

Sam winced. "Okay. Yeah. I'm sorry. But you could've joined me."

Dean went still. Deadly still. His voice was quiet when he said "Could I have? Really? You'd want part of your old life tagging along in your new one?"

Sam's jaw dropped. "Dean, I left you a letter. I told you my new email address and where to find me. I begged you to come with me."

And really, since that witch had cursed Dean the revelations were just hitting Sam hard with no reprieve and he hadn't thought his heart could break anymore but somehow, when Dean hunched in on himself and said "I never got any letter," it shattered just a little bit more.

"But I left it for you," Sam repeated dumbly. "I left it. I wanted you to come with me."

Dean lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug.

"Dad," Sam realized. The word was ash in his mouth. "He must have taken it."

"You really wanted me to come with you?" Dean asked.

He'd always seemed larger than life to Sam, no matter what age they were, because Sam had always been the younger brother, but now, Dean just looked small and hurt and his eyes were pleading for reassurance. "Yeah. I really did."

Dean relaxed a little bit. "You didn't leave me behind. You didn't mean to."

“Dean, have you been thinking this entire time that I just wanted to get away and didn’t care that I was abandoning you to Dad?” Forget his breaking heart, if Dean confirmed that it would be a dagger twisting in Sam’s chest.

Dean nodded.

“Is that why you- you went off the rails since I left, didn’t you. With the drinking and all?” Sam was leaning forward in his chair now and he was prying, he knew he was, but he had to know as much as he could before Dean clammed up or started to deflect.

Dean’s voice was quiet but steady. “It’s easy to fall into it when you don’t think you’ll be missed by anyone.”

And then he got up and left the room, like Dean always did when any confrontation got to be too much for him. Sam gave him his space for the rest of the day. Once his Dean was back, at his proper age, though, Sam was going to corner his skittish brother and they were going to have one hell of a talk.

Chapter 6: Thirty Years Old (angry, so angry)

Chapter Summary

> Thirty year old Dean is coming fresh off the Apocalypse and a certain voicemail that never got resolved…

Chapter Notes

> and lo it is all about the voicemail again.
> This is a short one leading up to the Main Talk they have and because I wanted to post before I'm on airplane mode for eleven hours so I typed it up real quick, hope you enjoy and lmk what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thirty year old Dean was suspicious. He exuded anger from every pore. His movements were jerky, he was always armed, and Sam woke up to Dean standing over him brandishing a knife. There was a smattering of blood across Dean's cheek, brought along with him from when it had landed on him five years ago.

"Hi," Sam croaked, trying to remember what had been going on five years ago.

Dean glared at him. Of the two of them, Sam was pretty sure he should be looking more like a cornered animal, but Dean was doing a pretty good job of it. "You detoxing again, you on it again? How did we get here?" Dean snapped.

Sam's heart sank. Right. The Apocalypse. This Dean was coming fresh off a juiced up Sam who'd just freed Lucifer.

Sam sincerely hoped he made it through the day with all his limbs still firmly attached. "Dean, listen," he said softly. "I know this all seems weird but for you, it's five years in the future right now. You were thirty five until a witch zapped you."

Dean's hand twitched around the knife. "So you're hallucinating again. Where even are we? Did you get us here?"

"We're in an old Men of Letters bunker," Sam told him, trying to reach for the gun under his pillow without Dean noticing he was moving.

Dean, of course, noticed immediately. “Cool it!” He snapped, and Sam froze. “I don’t trust you, but I’m not going to leave you here while I go look around. You got any proof?”

“My wallet is on the bedside table,” Sam said. “It’ll have bills and IDs made in the last five years.”

Dean snatched it up, thumbing through it while still keeping one eye on Sam. When he finished, he grunted, nodding once. “Either you’re real good at faking this whole mess, or you’re telling the truth.”

Sam moved to sit up, and was taken aback when water immediately splashed onto his face. Holy water. Dean really didn’t trust him.

Words echoed in Sam’s ears, Dean’s voice. This Dean’s voice. *Save you or kill you* , he whispered. *Bloodsucking freak* .

Shit. Fuck. How could Sam have forgotten, even for a few minutes? The words were burned so completely into his brain it was a miracle this hadn’t been the first thought in his head when he’d realized Dean would be making an appearance at thirty.

The holy water didn’t sizzle and didn’t burn away his skin, though, and that seemed to go a long way toward reassuring Dean.

Dean still took a silver knife and motioned for Sam’s forearm, which Sam gave willingly.

The slice was probably rougher than it had to have been, and Sam made a pained noise in his throat. But his flesh didn’t start to burn and bubble, and Dean finally put the weapons away. “I’ve been clean for years,” Sam told him.

He wasn’t sure what good he thought that was going to do. Dean was either still mad enough to want to kill him, in which case Sam was going to have a very interesting day, or he wasn’t. “Dean,” he said, mouth dry.

“Okay. Okay,” Dean said, nodding. “If you’re Sammy in five years, what happens with Lucifer? Since you’re alive, I’m guessing we fix it?”

Sam heard what Dean wasn’t saying: since you’re alive, I haven’t killed you, so you’ve fixed your fuckup. “It gets dealt with,” he said honestly.

Dean eyed him suspiciously throughout the day, but since Sam didn’t

start performing exorcisms with his mind, he eventually calmed down a little bit.

And Sam went through the whole day on tenterhooks, Dean's words from the voicemail ringing in his ears. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to be afraid of his brother. Dean noticed, Sam knew he did, and Sam knew he was filing the information away in that big brain of his. He waited for Dean to go to bed that night before he went to sleep, locking his door. Just in case.

Chapter End Notes

> Next up, the final chapter: Dean is back to normal and it's time for one Hell of a conversation

Chapter 7: The Fallout (part 1)

Chapter Summary

The talking begins

Chapter Notes

y'all turns out when you pump me full of caffeine and stick me on a plane for ten hours I get really productive

The next morning Dean, his Dean, was sitting slumped on the floor outside Sam's bedroom door. Sam, wandering out of his room with a jaw-cracking yawn and scratching his stomach, nearly tripped over Dean's legs.

When Dean looked up at him, it was with eyes filled with guilt, and Sam immediately realized what was happening. Dean hadn't remembered what had happened the previous days as he'd aged with the spell, but now he obviously did. "I pulled a gun on you," he said, voice hoarse.

Play it cool, Sam decided. Dean would get wary and unlikely to talk if Sam acted like he might react to Dean's emotions. "Wasn't the first time, won't be the last," he said casually, moving past Dean and heading for the kitchen. "I could really go for some Cinnamon Toast Crunch right now. You coming?"

"Over breakfast, then," Dean muttered from the floor, struggling to his feet and ignoring Sam's hand held out offering help. He was uncharacteristically quiet as Sam poured them two bowls of cereal and sat them both at the table across from each other. "We're going to talk about it, aren't we," he asked once Sam was settled in and had taken his first bite.

"Eat." Sam nodded to Dean's still untouched bowl. "And then yeah, we're gonna talk about it."

Spoon clinking against the bowl, Dean took a few bites before the words started coming. "Shit, Sam," he started, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. Like, really fuckin' sorry."

Sam kept eating. There were a turmoil of emotions brewing in him, and he needed to handle the situation delicately. Dean had just had

parts of his life he'd never expected Sam to see flayed open. Sam needed to tread carefully or risk hurting his brother beyond fixing. "Dean," he said after a minute.

"No, listen," Dean told him. "I'm really sorry."

Sam folded his hands on the table, cereal forgotten. "What are you apologizing for, Dean?" Knowing his brother, it was for something stupid like getting himself deaged in the first place.

"This whole mess." Dean wasn't meeting his eyes. That was a danger sign.

"Dean," Sam said softly, resisting the urge to reach across the table and grab Dean, to convey his love through a solid touch to Dean's shoulder or arm. Dean would flee if Sam did that, and he knew it. He decided to start with what was most important. "I'm not pissed at you, I swear."

"You're gonna want to talk about this in depth, aren't you?" Dean seemed at least resigned to it, like he wasn't going to fight Sam every step of the way. At Sam's nod, he grimaced. "Well, let's go chronological order. Observations about kindergarten me?"

When Sam didn't immediately speak, trying to get his thoughts in order, Dean spread his arms. "Psychoanalyze away, Sammy. It's all yours, cause I know you won't let up until we have this conversation."

Shit. He was going on the defensive. Sam had to snap him out of it. "You were an adorable kid," he said. Dean cocked his head, taken aback. "No, seriously," Sam continued, smirking. "Cute little freckled button nose and everything."

Dean chuckled almost against his will. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

Sam narrowed his eyes and leaned in, letting Dean know he was about to get serious. Tension deflated and his defensiveness undermined, Dean allowed it. "You weren't a kid," Sam pointed out. "Not really. Even at five. You were already trying to be responsible for me."

Dean snorted. "I already was responsible for you. Dad sure as hell wasn't mixing up formula and changing your dirty diapers."

"And that wasn't okay, Dean," Sam pressed on. "You were five years old. You shouldn't have been put in that situation at all. And I can see you blaming yourself for stuff you know now should have been done

differently, but it wasn't your fault. You did the best you could and I was lucky to have you, but Dad still never should have put that responsibility on you."

Dean wasn't meeting his eyes. The tips of his ears were red. "Wasn't exactly a big bad hunter back then. Hell, I asked for cuddles and then fell asleep on you."

The power of the self-loathing in Dean's voice startled Sam. "Hey, whoa." He had to try to alleviate some of the damage. "Dean. You were a traumatized kid. It's okay to want contact and comfort."

"Dad tried to teach me not to," Dean argued. "Tried to teach me not to need it. But I did." Then, quieter. Like he was confessing a secret. "I still do."

"Dean." No response. "Dean, hey, look at me. Everybody needs contact. It's a human thing. It can't be just trained out of us."

Dean shrugged, lopsided. "Yeah, okay. Can we move on to age ten now? Gotten all the first chick flick moment out of the way?"

His brother was antsy and anxious, but he was still at the table, and Sam was grateful. He knew full well that if he hadn't insisted on talking, Dean would be happy to retreat for a few days and then emerge pretending nothing ever happened. "Yeah," he said. "Okay. But I'm telling you, Dean. It's not your fault you're human. It's Dad's for trying to make you into something you're not."

Dean scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Okay. Fine. Whatever." His voice wavered, though, and Sam knew he'd gotten through.

"Okay. Ten year old Dean." Sam had two main points, the food and the flinching away from Sam and from the look on Dean's face, he knew exactly what was coming and he wasn't looking forward to it. "Dean?" He prodded, hoping Dean would say something.

"I lied," Dean said abruptly. "When I said I knew you wouldn't hit me and it was just the whiskey smell. I didn't know you wouldn't hit me. I was scared you'd turned out like Dad." And then he clenched his jaw tightly shut and sat staring at the floor.

Sam's already battered and bruised heart took another blow. "Dean. You were ten years old, in a strange place, with a strange man. You said whatever you thought you needed to to keep yourself safe and

Dean, that's a good thing." He hoped his words were getting through. It didn't look like they were.

Dean glanced up at him. "I know you won't hurt me bad now, Sam. Now that we're back to normal and all. Just the usual wrestling and occasional punch. But then, all I knew was that you were my brother all grown up and that meant you had John's blood in you, and I was scared."

Sam nodded sympathetically.

"Even though you fed me the best food I'd had probably the whole year I was ten," Dean continued. "I still thought you'd- I'm sorry, Sammy."

Sam was trying very hard to keep his voice moderated, he really was, but some of the sadness was leaking through. It was better than the anger, though, which he was keeping on a *very* tight leash. "You were an abused child, Dean," he said, slowly and clearly. "The way you thought and acted was you trying to keep yourself safe. And that's okay. It's not okay that Dad abused you, but your reactions are okay. I swear I'm not mad at you about anything you did or said."

"It wasn't abuse," Dean objected, nettled. "I'm not some battered woman."

"You were ten years old," Sam said flatly. "You were a child, and you were half starved, and there were whip marks on your back."

"Belt," Dean corrected.

"Dean." Sam's exasperation was showing, he knew it was. He couldn't help it.

"Fine!" Dean's fist hit the table. Expressing his helpless frustration the only way he could. "Fine, okay. Dad neglected us and didn't feed us and yeah, he lit into me sometimes. Happy?"

"And it wasn't okay that he did that, and you didn't deserve any of it."

A muscle twitched in Dean's cheek. He appeared to be undergoing a massive internal struggle.

"And it wasn't okay that he did that, and you deserved none of it. None of the pain or fear or hunger. You were a kid, Dean, you didn't do anything wrong." Sam pasted on his most patient expression. He'd

sit here all day and all night if that was what it took for Dean to acknowledge the truth.

“Fine, okay.” At Sam’s look, Dean continued. “I was a kid and I didn’t deserve to be abused by Dad.”

It wasn’t said with as much conviction as Sam would have liked, but at least the idea was planted in Dean’s head. “Okay. Good job, Dean. And the food thing, do you still, uh. Have issues stemming from that?”

It was a stupid question, because obviously Dean did, and Sam definitely deserved the look his brother was giving him. The look that said seriously dude, are you stupid or something? “It’s not a problem,” Dean said instead. “I’m managing it.”

This was doubtful to Sam, who had been witness to the various digestive issues Dean dealt with as a result of scarfing down food even when it was old or barely edible, but he nodded. Dean wasn’t spectacularly crashing and burning on that front, and that was good enough for him. “Okay. If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean said. They both knew he probably wouldn’t, but it made Sam feel better to have offered.

“Fifteen,” Sam said, and let the word hang in the air. This would be possibly one of the most delicate parts of the conversation.

Dean sighed heavily. “I’m not getting out of talking about this, am I?”

“If you really don’t want to, I’m not going to force it,” Sam said seriously. “But I do think it’s a conversation that needs to be had.”

Dean shook his head, resigned. “Fine. You sure got fifteen year old me at a hell of a time, huh?”

Sam nodded. He remembered fifteen year old Dean in the hallway, turning to throw up bile. Bile and, he realized with a sick twist of his stomach, probably cum from a client. Hearing fifteen year old Dean sobbing in the shower, helpless little hitching breaths like he was trying to stop and just couldn’t.

Dean looked at him oddly. Sam figured he might have a strange expression on his face. “Sam,” Dean said hastily. “Sam, you gotta- you gotta believe me, I did what I had to do. I didn’t do it because I

wanted to. I swear."

"Dean, you were a teenager. No teenager prostitutes themselves because they want to."

Dean hunched further into himself with every word, until he was a miserable little ball of suffering curled up in the chair. "You'll look at me differently now that you know," he whispered. "I know you will. Everybody does."

Sam ached to reach out and comfort Dean. He thought that at this point Dean might even let him. "Dean, look at me," he pleaded, gentling his tone. Dean peeked up at him through red-rimmed eyes. If Sam couldn't get Dean to see his point on any other topic, any other age they'd be discussing, he had to get his point across clearly and concisely on this one. "First of all," he said, locking eyes with Dean. "You think I care how many dicks you've sucked, Dean? Because I don't. I'm not judging you for that. What I do care about is how you were underage and everything that happened while you were underage was statutory rape."

Dean flinched at the word, but Sam pressed on. He had to make Dean understand. "And Dean, you were- you did it for me. It was to make money to take care of me. And you can't try to deny that, I know it was."

Dean made a small noise that might have been agreement.

"I won't look at you any different, Dean, because you did what you had to do to keep us both alive. I'll hate that you had to do it til the day I die, but I could never hate you for it."

A tension was released from Dean's shoulders as Sam talked. "It hurt," he revealed, his voice small. "You got me right after the first time, and, uh." He quietened to a whisper and Sam leaned in to listen. "It really hurt," Dean confessed.

Yeah, Sam would just bet it did. Any asshole with questionable enough morals to hire a teenage hooker wasn't going to care much for the comfort levels of said hooker. Thinking of Dean, his Dean, his stone number one, in pain because he was trying his best to provide for Sam, twisted his heart and his eyes filled with tears. "God, Dean. How could I never have noticed?"

"I didn't want you to know. Didn't want you to ever find out." Dean paused. "And it worked for a while, I guess."

“Yeah.” It worked too well for a while. Sam would never have known if not for the spell.

Dean shifted, clearly anxious. “Hey, so I know we’ve got some more time to go through, and I know there’s more you want to talk about but, uh.” He fidgeted with his sleeve.

“You’d like to take a break and regroup,” Sam finished for him. “I think that’s a good idea.”

Dean poked at his bowl of cereal, now soggy and thoroughly unappetizing, and lifted another spoonful to his mouth. “Whoa, hey,” Sam cut in. “That looks disgusting at this point. And there’s an IHOP like fifteen minutes away. Let’s go there instead, yeah?”

Dean eyed him. “I know what you’re doing,” he grumbled, but he stood up and went to pull on his shoes.

“What am I doing?” Sam asked innocently. “Can’t I treat my awesome big brother to an IHOP breakfast sometimes?”

“You can give your awesome big brother a hug,” Dean offered as he grabbed his jacket. “Uh, if you want to. I know you’re all touchy-feely like that, Samantha.”

Sam didn’t even mind the nickname. This was his touch-starved, traumatized brother asking to be comforted, and Sam was more than happy to oblige. He stepped forward and wrapped Dean in his arms, waiting for the tension to melt out of Dean.

Eventually Dean relaxed, dropping his head onto Sam’s shoulder, and Sam rubbed his back in soothing concentric circles.

The drive to IHOP was quiet, but comfortingly so despite all the unsaid things still hanging between them. It was going to be okay, Sam thought. Dean had been through a lot and had hidden most of it, but he was going to be okay now. Sam would make sure of it.

Chapter 8: The Fallout (cont'd)

So," Dean said as they sat in a secluded corner booth and Dean dug into his blueberry pancakes. Sam was closely examining his own, strawberry, stack. "I was kind of a wimp when I was twenty, right?"

"No," Sam scolded. "Nuh-uh. Don't talk about yourself like that."

"Oh, now you're on a one-man crusade to fix my self-esteem?" Dean wiped syrup off his chin. Something in Sam puffed up with pride at being able to feed his brother properly, even if it was pancakes bought with a stolen credit card.

"Yes." He speared a strawberry with his fork, squinted at it, deemed it appropriate, and slid it onto Dean's plate. "Try a strawberry, they're good."

Dean was glowering. "I know what this is about?"

"What?" Sam played innocent. "You need to eat more fruit is all."

"You and your backwards fucked up nurturing instincts," Dean grumbled. "Where did they even come from?" But he ate the berry, so Sam counted it as a win.

"You at twenty," he mused once Dean had consumed the berry and was back to drenching his pancakes in syrup with childish glee. "You were… lost. Drifting. You just wanted to feel secure and loved."

Dean waved a fork at him. "Which is how we ended up cuddling on the floor of the gun range."

"Hey," Sam protested. "You weren't complaining then."

Dean cast his eyes downward. "Not really complaining now, either. It was nice." Sam sensed there was more coming, so he stayed quiet and tried to look like a trustworthy listener. "You were sixteen," Dean said eventually. "Then. And you'd just started talking about going away to college."

From just those few statements, Sam gleaned a wealth of information. Dad had been leaving them for longer and longer now that Dean wasn't in school and could work and take care of Sam, so he was nearly out of the picture, and then with Sam wanting to leave too? No wonder Dean had been feeling insecure and abandoned. "Oh, Dean."

Dean spun his juice glass on the table. “Do you really think Ben was mine?”

There was guarded hope in his eyes, and it would’ve made Sam lie if he didn’t think so, but he actually did. “The kid’s practically a carbon copy of you,” he told Dean. “How could he not be yours?”

“Nice to know I didn’t fuck up one of my kids,” Dean said after a minute. “Much. I mean, I definitely made mistakes and I definitely fucked up a lot with him, but I think I was kinda a good role model for a while.”

“You were,” Sam said earnestly. He knew all too well how Dean’s other kids had turned out. One of them was him, the literal Antichrist, and he’d shot the other one. “I’m sorry about Emma,” he offered.

Dean gave him a crooked grin. “‘S in the past. I’m fine. Moving on?”

There would clearly be no more discussion about twenty year old Dean, so Sam sighed and agreed. “You at twenty-five,” he said, and then stopped. He didn’t know where to go from there.

“I was a disaster,” Dean said bluntly. “I was turning into Dad. I only snapped out of it when I got you from Stanford because I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

Well, at least he was being open and communicating. “Because I left,” Sam filled in the blank. “I did that to you.”

Dean took a drink of juice. He held the cup with both hands, and Sam suppressed a smile. “Did you really leave me a letter?” Dean asked.

Sam remembered sitting at the rickety motel desk and writing that letter, putting his new mailing address and email, crossing his fingers that Dean would follow him. Remembered the crushing disappointment when the days turned into months and no Dean appeared. “Yeah.” Sam’s voice was rough and he cleared his throat. “Folded it up into a square and tucked it into your boot. Thought for sure you’d see it.”

“Never had a letter in my boot.”

Sam sighed. “Dad must have seen it before you did.”

Dean nodded, taking another bite of pancake before moving to his side sausage. “For what it’s worth, if it’s worth anything, I would’ve

come," he said in a voice just a shade too casual. This was him being vulnerable again, opening up his chest cavity and baring his heart to Sam.

"I would've loved to have you," Sam told him honestly. "I swear, Dean, I never meant to abandon you."

Dean hastily scrubbed at his eyes. "Yeah. I know. I know that now."

"And I'll never abandon you again," Sam said seriously, elbows on the table, looking squarely at Dean.

Dean visibly swallowed down his emotions, along with half of a sausage. He was definitely focusing on eating so he didn't have to look at Sam. "Dean, I swear. Never again."

"Yeah." It came out rough, and Dean cleared his throat and tried again. "Yeah. Got it."

Sam decided it was time to move on. There was one more thing to talk about, and it could have disastrous consequences. "You at thirty," he said, and left the end of the sentence open.

"Shit, I'm sorry I treated you like that yesterday. It was crappy of me to do that." Dean grabbed Sam's arm, yanking it across the table and pulling his sleeve up to look at the cut. "You put some salve on that? I'll get it for you when we get back, okay?"

The mother henning was coming out in full force, which was marginally better than Dean going fully homicidal maniac in the middle of an IHOP. "You were pretty, uh. Cold."

Dean winced but pushed on. "And you were jumpy. Jumpier than you shoulda been considering we were on your home turf." He eyed Sam warily. "Now, I've spilled a metric fuckton of beans over the last week. It's your turn. What gives?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Well, uh. You were pretty aggressive and you'd just come from a me that had fucked up pretty bad. With the demon blood and all."

He hesitated for a long moment. "Yeah, I remember *how* ," Dean snipped. He was getting impatient. "What I want to know is why you were jumpy *yesterday* ." He planted his elbows firmly on the table. "Because it looked like you were scared of me, and you're not supposed to be scared of me."

“You’re not supposed to be holding me at knifepoint,” Sam retorted, but it was weak and he knew it. Dean had his measure and was like a dog with a bone. He was going to keep tugging at it until Sam spilled.

“I guess I just… that you was a whole lot closer in time to the voicemail than this you was, and I guess I thought you might be more likely to, y’know, act on it.”

Dean, unexpectedly, looked baffled. “Come on, Sam, I told you about the prostitution. You can tell me the truth.”

“Hey,” Sam objected, no heat in his voice. “You weren’t exactly chomping at the bit to tell me about that. And that was the truth.”

Dean’s brown furrowed as he shoved the last of his pancake into his mouth. “Voicemail?”

Sam, seeing that they’d both finished, slapped a couple of bills down on the table, enough to cover the meal plus a tip, and led Dean outside to the car. “The voicemail,” he hissed once they were out of hearing range of any innocent civilians. “Where you called me a monster and said you were going to kill me.”

Dean blanched, swaying back on his feet. “Whoa, whoa, hold up, time out. You spent yesterday thinking I was going to kill you.”

Sam shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I mean, not really. It was just a possibility.”

“A possibility. That I would kill you. Sam, I never said I would kill you. There has never been a time where I wanted you dead.”

“No, wait, no,” Sam dug his phone out of his pocket. Was it possible Dean had just forgotten? “Here.” He navigated to the saved message and thrust the phone at Dean, who pressed play and held it to his ear.

Sam was then treated to a solid fifteen seconds of Dean’s face contorting into every iteration of shock, horror, and disgust it was capable of.

When the message finished playing, Dean lowered the phone. Slowly and deliberately, like he was trying to keep from smashing it. “Sam,” he said, his voice deadly calm. “I never sent you that message.”

Quite suddenly, the ground dropped out from underneath Sam, and it was by sheer luck that he managed to twist and land so he was sitting

in the passenger seat of the Impala. “You,” he started, but he couldn’t get past that. Dean hadn’t ever called him a monster. Hadn’t ever said he was done trying to save Sam.

“Sam,” Dean said softly from where he was crouched in the parking lot in front of Sam. His hands were braced on Sam’s knees, and Sam focused on the contact as a grounding point. He took slow, deep breaths, marshaling his thoughts. The voicemail hadn’t been real. Dean had never wanted him dead.

“You never wanted to kill me.”

Dean shook his head. “Something, angelic or demonic or whatever, must have tampered with it. Because the message I sent you right before the apocalypse was that we were still brothers and I love you.”

Sam’s deep breathing wasn’t doing much for him. Still brothers. Dean loved him. He’d never needed to be afraid of Dean, not even the rough, angry Dean he’d been at thirty.

“You never hated me.”

“Sam.” Dean’s face took on an expression of extreme patience, which usually meant Sam was about to be hit with some truly spectacular Dean Logic. “I quite literally pimped my ass out to keep you alive. I think

it’s safe to say I have a vested interest in you staying that way.”

“Dean,” Sam wheezed, completely taken aback but, admittedly, snapped out of his impending panic attack. “You can’t just *say* things like that.”

Dean gave him a fragile smile. “‘S true, isn’t it? Anyway. Voicemail was fake, you’re my brother and I love you, let’s never talk about the last week again.” He lightly slapped Sam’s knee and stood up, walking over to the driver’s door and getting in.

“We’re both pretty fucked up,” Sam pointed out once the car was moving and Dean couldn’t easily escape him.

Dean made an agreeable noise. He was full of pancakes and sausage, and would probably be agreeable to most things. “So let’s not never talk about the last week again,” Sam continued. “We figured out a lot. I think I’m still in shock, but I feel a lot lighter after figuring out the voicemail thing. And I feel like I understand you better now too.”

Dean grumbled under his breath, finally saying “Yeah, okay. It helps to talk about it. Sometimes.”

“That’s all I’m asking.” Sam sent a pleased smile Dean’s way. The one that rankled his brother to no end, because even if all he really wanted to do right now was wrap Dean up in bubble wrap and guard him carefully, he was still a little brother first and foremost.

“Maybe, uh.” Dean said, swatting good-naturedly at Sam for the smarmy smile. “Maybe we can slightly increase the frequency and duration of our hugging.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Our nonexistent hugging?”

“Okay,” Dean muttered. “Maybe it needs more of a drastic increase. But we’re not talking about it.”

“Of course, Dean,” Sam agreed, and he settled in to watch Dean drive them home.

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